

### UNDERSTANDING YOUTHFUL RISK TAKERS

Highway safety and other public health professionals face many of the same issues in working with youth. Both groups have found that youth do not fully appreciate situational risks and are strongly swayed by peer and social influences. In addition, studies of youth show associations between risky on-road behaviors and other unhealthy activities. These similarities make it important to examine strategies in public health to identify intervention strategies that could apply to highway safety. A lesson evident in the public health literature is the value of early intervention to postpone the onset of risky behavior. The younger the initiation of unhealthy behaviors, the more likely the unhealthy behaviors will persist over time.

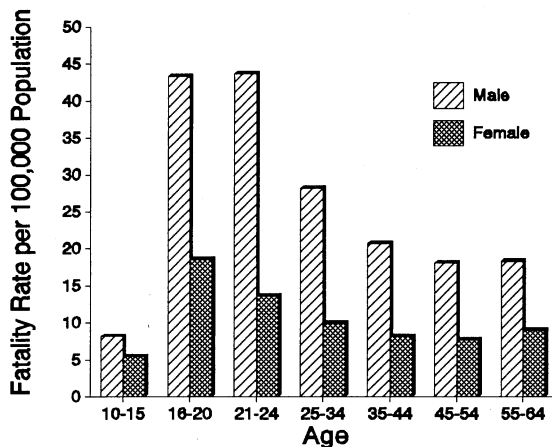
These are among the major findings in *Understanding Youthful Risk Taking and Driving*, the initial report of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA's) research program on youth. The program's goals are to gain

increased knowledge of youthful risk taking, and synthesize the information into a useful framework for developing highway safety countermeasures. The report contains a literature review that extends beyond highway safety into areas of substance use, violence, and sexual behavior to provide a fuller context to identify solutions to risk taking behaviors.

Young males are overrepresented in motor vehicle crashes and fatalities, as the figure shows. Novice drivers quickly attain proficiency in skills like steering and braking. Over a period of months, they learn to concentrate visual fixations in the vehicle's projected path, and to use peripheral vision to locate the vehicle in the lane.

Development of decision skills, however, lags behind the acquisition of these motor skills. Studies show youth are more likely to engage in risky behaviors such as speeding, tailgating, and not using safety belts. Youth often overestimate their driving skills and tend to perceive themselves as less vulnerable to a crash than their peers. Their driving performance may suffer because they pay more attention to social interactions with passengers. Adding to potential risks for youth are personal traits that some studies have associated with riskier driving or crashes. These include sensation seeking, which some theorists believe is greater among teenagers, and behavior disorders.

Youth also show a lack of appreciation for health risks in such areas as substance use and sexual activity. Knowledge about associated risks is a poor predictor of whether or not youth will engage in unhealthy behaviors. They instead are often more attuned to immediate social costs and



**Fatality Rate by Age and Gender**

Source: NHTSA, *Traffic Safety Facts* 1993





benefits. Adolescents also like to feel that they are in control and may disregard warnings about negative consequences.

As in highway safety, males are at greater risk than females for substance use, high risk sexual behavior, and violence. Demographic variables like race, ethnicity, or family background have been significant areas of inquiry in the public health field but not in highway safety to date. This has produced information and insights for health-related risk taking by youth. The public health field often uses a social influences approach to develop countermeasures to problem behaviors. The report describes some of these countermeasures. Programs based on social influences have had promising results when applied before a problem behavior has been established. Positive results are less likely once the behavior has become entrenched.

The developmental, cognitive, social, and other characteristics of adolescents produce risk factors for unsafe behavior across several health-promotion and injury-prevention areas. Determining how to influence youthful behavior in the context of these risk factors poses a direct challenge to safety practitioners. In particular, there are questions of how to deal with the pervasive influence of peers so that youth are swayed in a positive, rather than negative, direction. There also are questions of how to broach safety issues to youth in a manner that they can comprehend and appreciate. NHTSA will explore both questions in future research.

Limited copies of the report, prepared by The Comsis Corporation, are available. To obtain a copy of **Understanding Youthful Risk Taking and Driving**, (117 pages), contact the Office of Program Development and Evaluation, NHTSA, NTS-30, 400 Seventh Street, S.W., Washington, DC 20590, (202) 366-2752, or send a fax to (202) 366-7096. Alan Block was the technical manager of this project.

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